

## **What is the Face of Academia? Descriptive Analysis of Student and Educator Opinions**

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### **Abstract**

Understanding the purpose of higher education (HE) could help navigate the modern crisis where the aims of HE have become diffused and where students and educators believe the academic environment should be different than it currently is. Building on grounds by Watty (2006), this descriptive analysis explores the attitudes towards and beliefs about the roles of students, educators, and the university itself while comparing potential differences between the views of educators and students. The data was gathered through an online survey which was filled out by 166 students and 35 educators mostly affiliated with the University of Groningen. Statistical analysis using ANOVA revealed no significant differences between the opinions of students and educators. At the same time, paired t-tests indicated numerous significant differences in statements that compared attitudes to beliefs about HE. The results were in line with previous research and further support the need for the creation of a framework for the purpose of HE.

*Keywords:* Higher education, purpose, academia, students, educators, university

## What is the Face of Academia? Descriptive Analysis of Student and Educator Opinions

Let's consider we live in a world where the purpose of higher education (HE) is to maintain and develop a hierarchical society that is based either on credentials or material merit HE itself would guarantee. In such a society, minorities remain marginalized, HE is only seemingly available to people of all socio-economic backgrounds, discrimination, neoliberalism and whiteness are perpetuated, and the main focus of HE is to obtain a degree. Such an objective of higher education is represented by the Credentialism theory and Social Reproduction theory (Bourdieu et al., 1990; Guan & Blair, 2022; McCloud & Messmore, 2023). In support of this argument, Brooks et al. (2021) too put forward notions that students might perceive education as instrumental for their later involvement in the labour market, however Bal et al. (2014) reported productivity-focused academia as a harmful, nondesirable environment for its students and teachers. Simultaneously, Chen (2016) provides a literature overview in which he thematized recurrent topics of personal and societal gains of attaining a university degree which encompass more humanistic skills compared to the attainment of material wealth or credentials. These include social benefits such as *advanced knowledge and higher cognitive skills, greater appreciate for diversity, more likely to donate blood,* etc. while individual benefits envelop *better consumer decision-making, increased personal status, higher salaries, and work benefits.* Although credential or humanistic views on the purpose of HE can be complementary, such ideas potentially underlying the idea of a university are commonly understood as assumptions rather than strict agreements (Brooks et al., 2021).

Stakeholders and institutions representing HE have no strict agreement as to what the university serves. To set more examples; on one hand, a university can serve as a cultural bridge and a place of academic realisation for both students and educators, on the other hand, modern employers have begun to offer internships and tend to require a bachelor's degree as an employment standard (Fuller & Manjari, 2017). With such requirements and university education

being more available to the wider public, this directly connects university objectives to worldwide economic systems.

Furthermore, in the recent past, universities and university students were also reported as forms of political resistance. One of the most infamous examples is the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests and massacres in Beijing and more recently, the pro-democracy protest in 2017 in Hong Kong. These events beg the question of what role the university facilitates in reacting to global political events, and how does this reflect its social duties? Douglass and the University of California (2022) frame the question well in the article titled “When Are Universities Followers or Leaders in Society?”. If universities are viewed as cribs of knowledge and essential places for research all around the globe, with the addition of academics commonly being viewed as authorities in their specialization and universities being connected to the global economy, then one of the aims ought to be to react to global health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic or rampaging consequences of international conflicts such as current wars happening around the globe. In other words, in a scenario where the main purpose of universities is to provide knowledge on critical topics, it could also be part of that purpose to react to knowledge-related events.

Refocusing on academia, student voices are crucial for understanding its purpose. In a 2024 panel discussion by Lamie & Hill, students expressed diverse and sometimes vague ideas about what a university is, linking it to the institution’s motivation and goals. From an academic perspective, one student noted:

“Universities provide space and opportunities to think outside the local and the national, which simultaneously being situated and distinct, carry their own context and history which shapes the learning on offer to students. Of course, there is the additional aspect of a university’s capacity to bring together people from disparate national and international contexts, providing a place-based international and inter-communal interaction. (p. 178)”

This quote demonstrates more humanistic values and amalgamation between the students and the university. Additionally, students' contemplations indicated that a university should be acting as a responsible agent in the local community as well as it should support the sustainability agenda for the planet.

A similar bio-societal concern is expressed by Brooks et al. (2021). In such a study a cross-national survey was conducted in which students from Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Spain, and Poland reported on their perceptions of the aims of higher education Brooks et al. (2021). In this study, perceived purposes varied from a credential type of purpose to topics covering *Personal growth and enrichment*, *Societal development and progress*, and *Preparation for the labour market*. Although preparation for the labour market was a strongly emphasised purpose of HE, this study demonstrates students of different nationalities also perceive other objectives, purposes the development of which has more to do with humanistic values such as global citizenship and personal ethics. This finding bears witness that students have a multifaceted view of the purpose of higher education.

Besides the students' voices, educators present a distinct group of the university. In this paper, we refer to people who teach at a research university when we speak of educators. Assuming their primary purpose is to teach in a university setting, differing understandings of what it means to teach stem from historical, personal, social, and cultural notions of meaning (Milutinović et al., 2023; Pratt, 1992). Rephrased differently, these factors attempt to explain how a person's perspective on teaching guides their behaviour. For example, university teaching staff of soft sciences background (Sports and Physical Education, Economics, Philosophy, Education, Law) would score higher by prioritising *Social reform* and *Nurturing* more than teaching staff of hard sciences (Technical Sciences, Mechanical Engineering, Medicine, Agriculture, Sciences, Technology) (Milutinović et al., 2023). *Social reform* and *Nurturing* refer to what extent the teacher

would encourage thought on social change and how concerned would a teacher be for her students. The study showed that disciplines of study are related to what role the teacher would aim to take on in HE.

Similarly, yet without assuming the educators' primary role is to teach, Watty (2006) examined perceptions of university teaching staff, focusing on differentiating beliefs and attitudes towards the underlying idea of higher education. Namely, Watty (2006) demonstrated that by asking relevant questions on *what is* the purpose of higher education (that represented attitude) and *what should be* the purpose of higher education (that represented belief). A significant gap between seven out of eight research domains has been found, with the highest ranked domain being *the purpose of higher education is to provide work-ready graduates*. The gap between beliefs and attitudes indicated the need for systemic improvement or change in the field of higher education according to the opinions of educators (Watty, 2006). Yet, other perspectives such as the perspectives of students and university staff remain unexamined.

The differences in perspectives on the grounds of higher education may vary not only depending on the role within HE institution, but also on interpersonal factors such as field affiliation, nationality, and subjective preferences (Barnett, p. 32, 2022; Brooks et al., 2021; Lopez & Fontela, 2024; Milutinović et al. 2023). While for some, HE can represent an environment where specific knowledge of interest can be deepened, for others it can be a traditionally necessary step in the life path as reported by Ball et al. (2002). Even national ministries of education across the world commonly supervising the management of institutions of higher education do not appear to clearly state what the purpose of HE is, rather they state what the visions and goals of the ministry department for higher education are rather than the purpose itself (BMBF, n.d.; MEXT, n.d.; Ministerie van Onderwijs, 2024; Ministrstvo za vzgojo in izobraževanje, 2024). Such reports bear witness to the fact that not only do opinions on the purpose of higher education differ systematically, but there's an absence of a system which would categorize these differences.

Academics such as Barnett (2022, p. 1), Chan (2016) and Tight (2023) have been vocal about the lack of a framework for the underlying purposes of higher education, concurrently, they report that the philosophy of higher education has been evolving substantially for the past thirty years. For instance, the International Society of and for Philosophy and Theory of Higher Education or so-called PaTHES-an was formed in 2017 which shows there is a community eager to understand the identity of HE (PaTHES, 2021). Despite these recent developments in the field that could potentially explain the purpose of higher education, Barnett (2022, pp. 1-3) warns the understanding of HE is still sparse and calls for more research.

In the Netherlands alone there have been 476 830 students who were enrolled in a university program in 2023 and notably, this is without the estimation of professors and university staff (CBS Statline, 2024). These numbers represent a significant amount of people involved in the process of HE, people who devote their time, mental and material resources to such institutions, yet there seems to be no common agreement on what the purpose of engaging in a university setting is nor is there a framework that would allow us to categorise purposes of HE.

The call for a framework for the purpose of HE stems from several factors. Namely, forms of HE are commonly mass institutions in which several groups are representative stakeholders such as students, professors, whoever pays the tuition fees, and university staff (Chan, 2016). In other words, it comes as no surprise when we learn that thousands of people are or have been affiliated with a particular institution of higher education, that such an organisation requires large funding and that its stakeholders are concerned with the institution's management. Within these mass enterprises, due to their bidirectional relationship with globalisation and increased trends in mass education (Barnett, 2022, p. 32; Mattei et al., 2023, pp. 4-22), universities have become intercultural bridges as well as meeting points for people of differing opinions, and professional and ethical backgrounds. This is a significant change as opposed to what universities were a hundred to two hundred years ago where gender and racial discrimination were prevalent and the idea of a



university was predominantly a concept of Western society which would view academics as a distinct social group (Albisetti, 2019, pp. 149-160; Wechsler & Diner, 2021).

Having a clearer, concrete understanding of what is the underlying idea of HE can shed light on relevant topics such as inclusivity, accessibility to education, etc., which can then in turn, inform policymakers working and governing guidelines of higher education institutions. For instance, Tight's (2023) work on curriculum development presents several notions of 'foci of the curriculum', i.e. most popular themes such as decolonisation, employment, gender, internationalisation, etc. that would inform the making of a curriculum nowadays. A suitable question regarding our paper is *should all these topics be addressed in a curriculum of higher education simultaneously? Does the inclusion of all these topics apply to all faculties within the university?* If the purpose of higher education is to create an employable workforce or to be an institution of advancement of human knowledge, then it is sensible to adapt the curriculum, if not the entire organization of a university appropriately. The differences between attitudes and beliefs concerning the objectives of HE could fill that gap.

In the present paper, we will use the term HE to refer to research universities exclusively and we will avoid discussing colleges and other forms of higher education. This distinction originates from Barnett's (2022, pp. 26-36) warning to distinguish colleges and universities and from the fact that it is more precise and comprehensive to examine more similar institutions than less similar institutions in terms of their organisation and background mechanisms and ideas. For example, one may argue that universities of applied sciences such as Hoger Beroeps Onderwijs programs in the Netherlands may have a somewhat clearer purpose because they are more practice-oriented as opposed to university degrees; especially degrees that do not lead to clear modern-day job-related skills or job titles outside of academia such as philosophy programmes. For these reasons, the terms HE and (research) university will be used interchangeably.

Similarly, we will use the term purpose to refer to the answers to the simple questions of *what and why*, i.e.: *What is the essential purpose of a university education?* which can be followed and/or connected by asking *Why would one pursue affiliation with a higher education system?* Purpose may also be seen as an existential measure manifested in goals set by an individual which then lead to that individual's behaviour (Hirsh, 2010). If something is done without purpose, what does that mean for human societies? In sum, we can say the question of purpose may be potentially meaningful not only for relevant stakeholders in e.g. higher education such as policymakers and politicians, rather it may also be meaningful for personal reasons since as presented by Hirsh (2010) goals and having a purpose can have an impact on forming one's behaviour.

Additionally, having a clearer, concrete understanding of what is the underlying idea of HE might shed light on relevant topics such as inclusivity, accessibility to education, etc., which can then in turn, inform policymakers working and governing guidelines of higher education institutions. For instance, Tight's (2023) work on curriculum development presents several notions of 'foci of the curriculum', i.e. most popular themes such as decolonisation, employment, gender, internationalisation, etc. that would inform the making of a curriculum nowadays. A suitable question regarding our paper is *should all these topics be addressed in a curriculum of higher education simultaneously? Does the inclusion of all these topics apply to all faculties within the university?* If the purpose of higher education is to create an employable workforce or to be an institution of advancement of human knowledge, then it is sensible to adapt the curriculum, if not the entire organization of a university appropriately. The differences between attitudes and beliefs concerning the objectives of HE could fill that gap.

In this study, we wish to better understand the gap between attitudes and beliefs, as presented in Watty (2006) and applied in our survey. Namely, we will examine and describe educators and students on scales of the purpose of HE as these two groups present the most relevant

stakeholders. Foremost, this is a descriptive and exploratory study as the philosophy of higher education is an immature field in which perspectives on the purpose of HE are yet to be more clearly refined. By looking at the results of ideas on the purpose of higher education we wish to: a) determine whether there are differences in stakeholders' opinions on the current state of higher education (attitude) versus what it should ideally be (belief), b) Examine whether there are differences between what educators and students believe higher education should be and how they experience it, and c) identify the top-ranked reasons for studying according to both students and educators.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

This study was conducted in the form of an online survey, mostly targeting students and educators affiliated with the University of Groningen (UG) as we used convenience sampling as the method of gathering participants and a mechanism of SONA-a mandatory element of the programme for first-year students at the UG. The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences of the UG approved our research. Out of 338 participants, 208 filled out the survey. It was agreed that the minimal time spent doing this study was six minutes, hence all seven subjects who spent less than 360 seconds were excluded from the final analysis and the three subjects who identified as neither educators nor as students, leaving us with 201 valid responses. Out of 201 participants, 35 people their primary role in university is to be an educator and 166 identified as students. Other essential characteristics of participants are reported in Table 1.

### **Materials**

The survey used for this study was made up of several items. First, the primary survey measure was based on examined theories such as Social Reproduction Theory (Broadfoot, 1978; Shakeel & Peterson, 2023) Resource Dependency Theory (Powell & Rey, 2015) Humanistic Perspective (Farmer, 1984; Kiaei, 2017), Credentialism (Guan & Blair, 2022), Human Capital

Theory (Fényes & Mohácsi, 2020; Marginson, 2019) and Critical Pedagogy (Martin, 2017), all of which point to a specific idea underlying the purpose of higher education.

**Table 1**

*Participants Characteristics*

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Students (n = 166)</i>	<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Educators (n = 35)</i>
Gender		Gender	
Female	128	Female	16
Male	35	Male	18
Nonbinary	3	Nonbinary	0
Prefer not to say	0	Prefer not to say	1
Age average	21.78	Age average	42.83
Nationality		Nationality	
Dutch	79	Dutch	15
Other	87	Other	20
Type of university affiliation		Job title at institution	
Bachelor	109	PhD student	3
Master	13	Lecturer	6
PhD	6	Assistant professor	13
Graduated from RUG	1	Associate professor	6
Missing values	37	Full professor	4
		Other	3
Field affiliation		Field affiliation	
Psychology	72	Psychology	23
Pedagogy and Educational Sciences		Pedagogy and Educational Sciences	
Sciences	9	Sciences	1
Other	85	Other	11

*Note.* Data collected by the author on the 16th of June 2024.

The survey statements were developed by our thesis team comprising six students of psychology. Namely, these parts encompass items Q11, Q12, Q15, Q16, and Q17 which can be found in the appendix of this paper. Items Q11 and Q12 asked the student participants to evaluate reasons to study on a five-point scale ranging from *Does not describe me* to *Describes me extremely well*, the difference being that item Q11 asked for their reasons to study and item Q12 asked them to evaluate why would they advise their friend and/or loved one to study. On the other hand, educators were only asked what would they advise their loved ones on the Q12.

Items Q15, Q16, and Q17 examined the difference between the attitudes (what the participants think *is* the purpose of a university) and beliefs (what *should* be the purpose of a university) on a Likert scale ranging from *disagree* to *agree*. This research paradigm has been inspired by Watty (2006). Item Q15 consisted of 15 statements and was concerned with the students and content of university education. On the other hand, item Q16 consisted of 11 statements and considered the role of educators in university, while item Q17 consisted of 12 items and was concerned with the role of universities within the higher education system. To further examine the purpose of higher education in participants' own words, open-ended questions were added at the end of the survey.

Secondary items are item Q30; the general self-efficacy scale (GSE) by Schwarzer & Jerusalem (1995), item Q27; the purpose subscale of the Multidimensional Existential Meaning Scale (MEMS) by George & Park (2017), and lastly items Q17 and Q26 both of which measured satisfaction only, one item measured one's satisfaction with a student experience and the other item measured one's satisfaction with an educator experience, respectively.

## **Procedure**

The data were collected through an online survey sent to multiple chat groups on WhatsApp and the link to the survey was also shared on social media. Responses obtained were anonymous

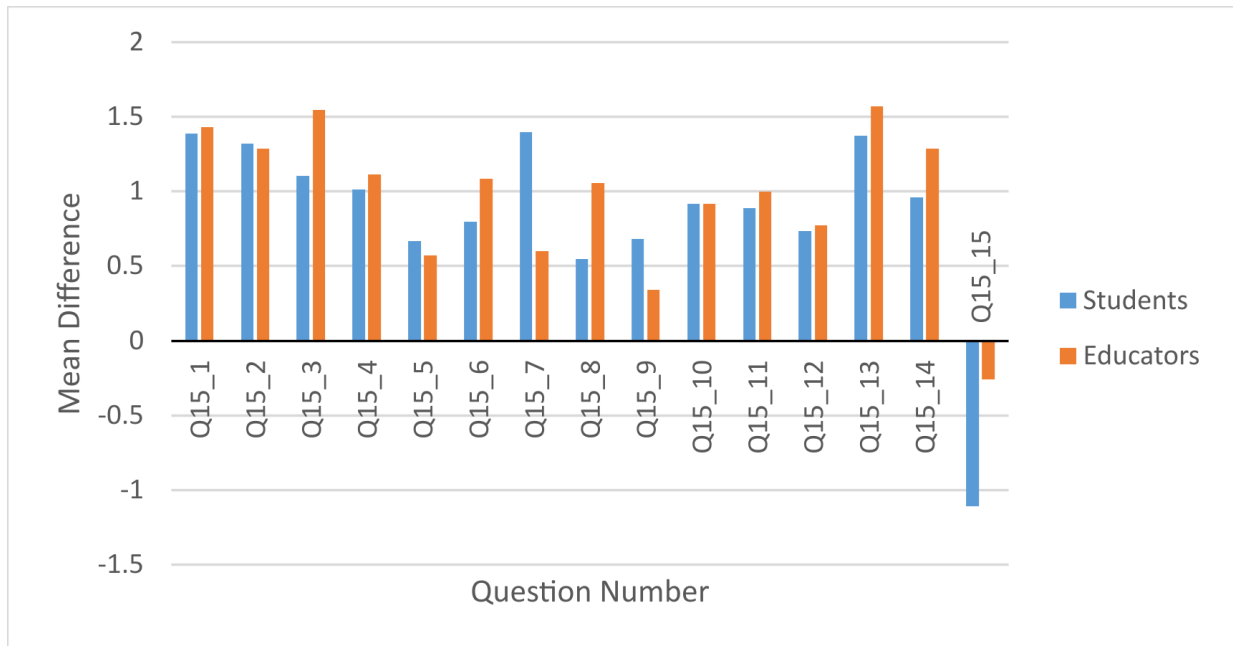
and once the participant consented to data collection, the survey began. Separated from the questionnaire responses, participants' email addresses were gathered with the option of winning a 30€ dinner voucher. Those responses in which consent was not given, are not part of the following analysis. The first part of the questionnaire consists of population descriptives and distinguishes between students and educators with the purpose of future between-group and within-group comparisons. The second part investigates the difference between attitudes and beliefs concerning the purpose of higher education. In contrast, the third part looks into secondary questionnaire items, lastly followed by a brief open-question segment in which participants could add notions regarding what is the purpose of higher education in their own words.

## **Results**

Following the inclusion and exclusion procedures, 201 participant responses have been examined. Firstly, for each question examining attitudes and beliefs, means of differences between attitudes and beliefs have been created for the three categories of question sets (students, educators, and universities). Visual representations of the difference between these means show discrepancies between beliefs and attitudes in all three categories across both groups; students, and educators. Figures 1, 2, and 3 show that students and educators are in some sort of agreement in terms of difference sizes, although the most outstanding difference between opinions of educators and students in terms of attitudes and beliefs appears to be on question Q16\_11 and there seems to be a slightly lesser difference of opinions on question Q17\_7. Yet, it is unclear how big these differences are if we compare them on a group level, i.e., if we compare differences in attitudes and beliefs of students to those of educators.

**Figure 1**

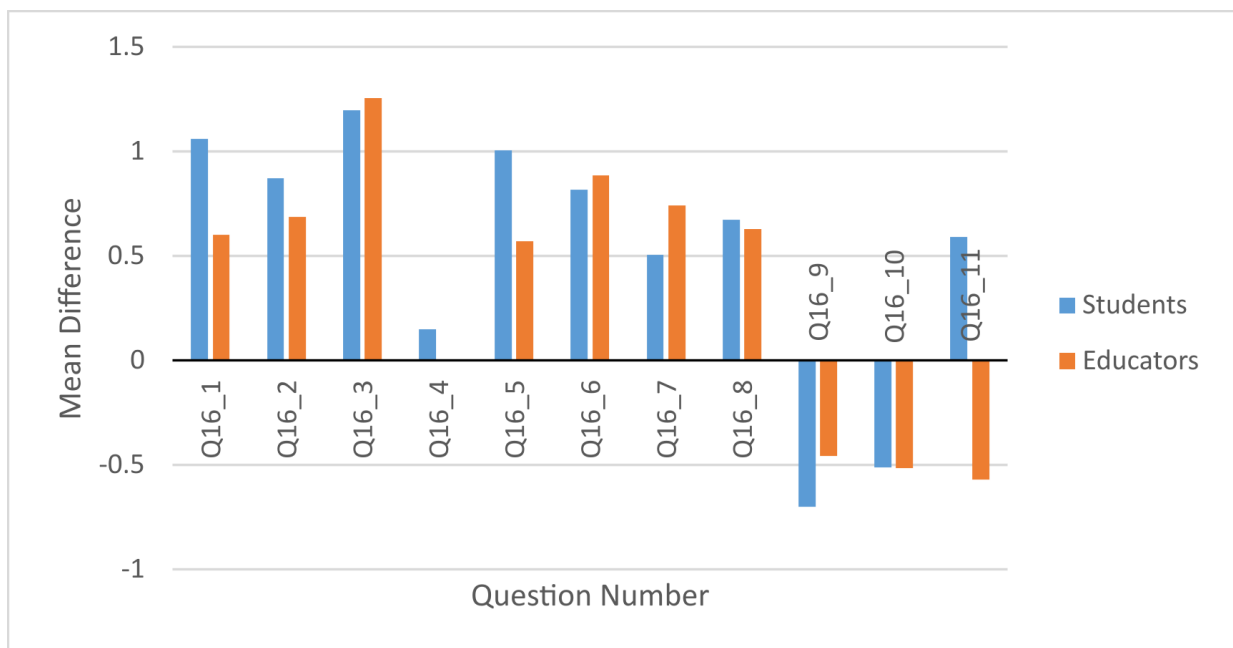
*Mean Differences between Beliefs and Attitudes on Students Question Category*



*Note.* This figure shows mean differences in survey category inquiring about the position of students. The exact questions put in words can be found in the appendix of this paper.

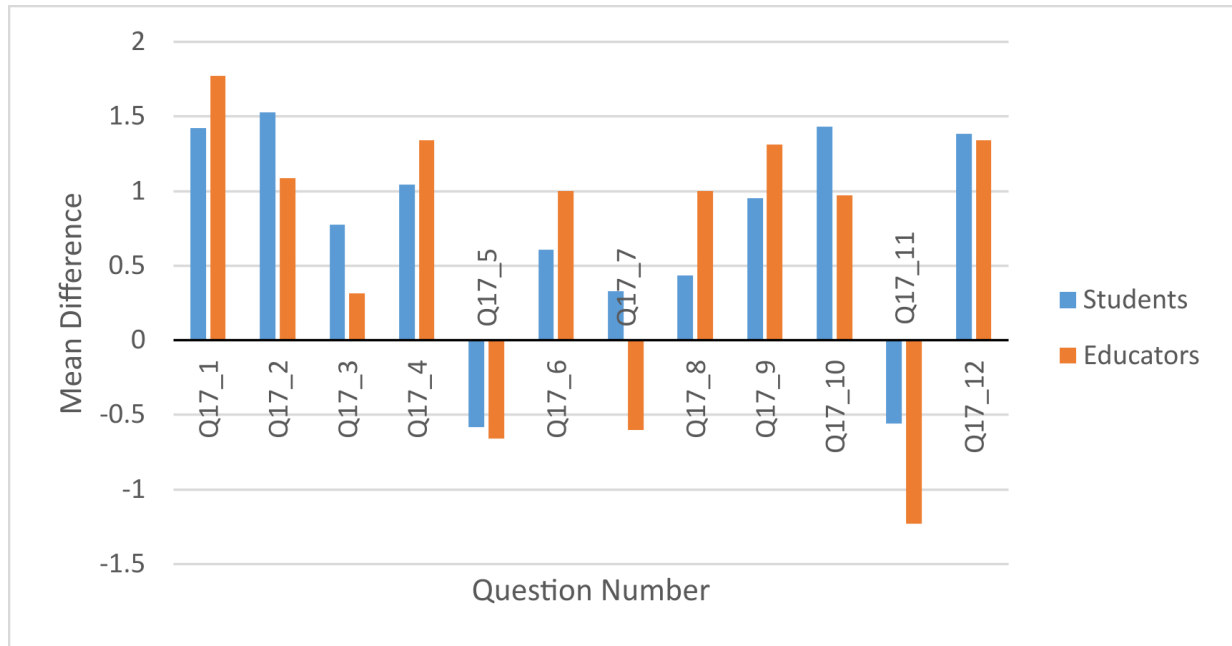
**Figure 2**

*Mean Differences between Beliefs and Attitudes on Educators Question Category*



**Figure 3**

*Mean Differences between Beliefs and Attitudes on University Question Category*



To examine the differences between attitudes and beliefs, we calculated the overall means of beliefs and attitudes by creating new variables that represented the overall mean average of e.g. beliefs about students, attitudes towards educators, etc., and to test normality we've conducted Shapiro-Wilk Tests which indicated dependent variables to be normally distributed except for student beliefs about university showed a significance ( $p < .001$ ). Paired t-tests in three group levels: all, students, and educators have been performed. The overall consensus between attitudes and beliefs showed significant differences using paired t-test analyses in examining all participants' views in the three categories; students, educators, and universities, as indicated in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Paired T-Test Results*

participants groups	Subject/ roles	Attitude		Belief		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
		<i>(Is section)</i>		<i>(Should section)</i>			
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
All	Students	3.25	0.49	4.12	0.44	20.27	<0.001
All	Educators	3.42	0.45	3.91	0.41	15.05	<0.001





Students	Attitude	3.27	0.50	3.16	0.44	0.94	0.59
	Belief	4.12	0.44	4.12	0.42		
Educators	Attitude	3.42	0.46	3.41	0.43	1.39	0.50
	Belief	3.94	0.41	3.81	0.42		
University	Attitude	3.29	0.44	3.23	0.49	1.16	0.49
	Belief	4.02	0.48	3.86	0.51		

*Note.* Data analysed by the author on the 20th of June 2024.

We now turn our attention to what statements were in consensus between attitudes and beliefs and which were not according to the opinions of educators and students. As numerous t-tests have been conducted, we used the Bonferroni correction which added to the adjusted significance value of  $p=.001$ . Despite the Bonferroni corrections, the majority of statements appeared to have a significant difference between attitudes and beliefs, across all groups. Hence, table 4 presents statements that turned out to be nonsignificant as they present a minority of such results, whereas the rest of the statements proved to hold significant differences between attitudes and beliefs.

**Table 4**

*Nonsignificant results of paired t-tests Specific Statements*

Groups	Subject/ roles	Statement	Attitude		Belief		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
			<i>(Is section)</i>		<i>(Should section)</i>			
			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
All	Educators	Instil factual knowledge and skills onto their students	4.36	0.69	4.48	0.76	2.24	0.026
All	University	Make society more productive	3.38	0.87	3.35	1.14	1.66	0.098
Students	University	Make society more productive	3.34	0.89	3.67	1.09	3.01	0.026
Educators	Students	Develop professional skills (e.g., teamwork, planning)	3.86	0.69	4.43	0.61	3.45	0.001

Educators	Students	Prepare for their career (e.g., make a LinkedIn profile, write professional emails)	3.11	0.87	3.71	1.07	3.18	0.003
Educators	Students	Expand personal network	3.09	0.92	3.43	1.04	2.65	0.012
Educators	Students	Prioritize education over other interests	3.03	1.01	2.77	1.00	-1.14	0.263
Educators	Educators	Create a space where everyone's opinions are heard	3.57	0.92	4.17	0.89	2.76	0.009
Educators	Educators	Instil factual knowledge and skills onto their students	4.26	0.74	4.26	0.89	0.00	1.000
Educators	Educators	Prioritize education over other interests	3.17	0.95	2.71	1.10	-2.34	0.024
Educators	Educators	Be an authority figure	3.40	1.04	2.89	1.18	-2.17	0.037
Educators	Educators	Not impose a strong political direction in the classroom	3.63	1.00	3.57	1.12	-0.26	0.794
Educators	University	Prepare people for jobs most needed in society	3.09	0.89	3.40	1.31	1.26	0.215
Educators	University	Prioritize educating gifted students	3.29	0.96	2.63	1.11	-2.60	0.014
Educators	University	Make society more productive	3.54	0.74	2.94	1.19	-2.71	0.011

*Note.* Data analysed by the author on the 22nd of June 2024.

Educators evaluated fewer differences between their attitudes and beliefs as compared to students. Namely, educators had a total of 12 statements which showed nonsignificant differences between their beliefs and attitudes whereas students had only one, as observed in the table above.

Lastly, the results of our descriptive indicated that among students the highest rated reason for studying was *to gain knowledge in my field of choice* ( $M = 4.40$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ), followed by *to*

*explore my interests* ( $M = 4.17, SD = 0.91$ ), and *to obtain a degree* ( $M = 4.15, SD = 0.82$ ). On the other hand, *to postpone starting a professional career* ( $M = 2.20, SD = 1.26$ ) was the least popular self-description of a student's reason for studying in, followed by *to meet the expectations of family and friends* ( $M = 2.51, SD = 1.14$ ), and *to develop a social network* ( $M = 2.86, SD = 1.11$ ). Students advising why their loved ones should study indicated *to explore one's interest* ( $M = 4.89, SD = 0.75$ ) as the most popular option of agreement, followed by *to gain knowledge in one's field of choice* ( $M = 4.32, SD = 0.74$ ) and *to develop one's potential as a person*, respectively ( $M = 4.27, SD = 0.81$ ). The least advised reason for a loved one to study reported by educators was *to meet the expectations of family and friends* ( $M = 1.49, SD = 0.66$ ) and *to postpone starting a professional career* ( $M = 1.86, SD = 0.88$ , ) followed by *to develop a social network* ( $M = 2.89, SD = 1.21$ ). Educators advising their loved ones to study agreed mostly on *to explore one's interests* ( $M = 4.54, SD = 0.70$ ), *to develop one's potential as a person* ( $M = 4.29, SD = 0.75$ ), and *gain knowledge in one's field of choice* ( $M = 4.20, SD = 0.93$ ), in this respective order.

### **Discussion**

The opinions of 201 participants indicate there is a gap between beliefs and attitudes and this gap appears to be somewhat consistently present across both groups of students and educators. Notably, we did not use the scales of meaning, satisfaction, and self-efficacy for our analysis as they were irrelevant to our research aims. To support our finding, t-test analyses indicated significant differences in opinions between attitudes and beliefs regarding HE systems in all groups (all participants, students only, and educators only) in all of the main three areas inspected: students' role, educators' role and the role of the university. Additionally, ANOVA analyses revealed nonsignificant differences between the opinions of educators and students on attitudes and beliefs on the topics of students, educators, and universities. In other words, all of our participants and participant groups point to a disparity between beliefs and attitudes in the context of higher

education and participants groups (educators in students) appear to be in somewhat of an agreement in terms of their attitudes and beliefs in the context of HE.

The discovered gap between attitudes and beliefs is in line with the study results by Watty (2006), yet their study was done on a sample of a teaching group of accountants who indicated appraisal of productivity-oriented values more whereas ours had predominantly psychology students who put forward humanistic principles. Most of the educators in our sample have a psychology background as well. Perhaps accountant educators readily appreciated pragmatic values more than psychology students, whereas people of psychology background might readily value humanistic values more (DeRobertis, 2013). Nevertheless, both studies indicate a gap worth addressing. Watty (2006) suggests responsible actors can only bridge such a gap by knowing and acknowledging the differing views on values and university practices. The responsible actors would mainly refer to university staff and educators whereas educators and students could be seen as the joint target audience for the relevant implementations.

Examining stakeholders' perspectives in HE institutions in Nepal, Adhikari & Shrestha (2023) reported a somewhat similar difference between attitudes and beliefs. They conducted interviews in which HE officials, educators, and students reported on initiatives that ought to be taken in HE institutions to achieve the sustainable development goal. In their context, the purpose of HE was given (to achieve the sustainable development goal), whereas it wasn't in ours. This discrepancy could potentially explain the gap between attitudes and beliefs because the purpose was clear in the context of Adhikari & Shrestha (2023) and as proposed by Hirsh (2010), purpose guides one's cognitions and actions. Nevertheless, their findings suggest according to the stakeholders the current state of Nepalese HE isn't what it should be. As in our study, differences between attitudes and beliefs were found among stakeholders.

There is supporting evidence that the opinions of students and educators are similar in terms of the differences between their attitudes and beliefs and we can further observe that similarity through the examination of individual statements. More specifically, participants' beliefs were

significantly different to their attitudes in the majority of the 39 questions on the role of HE. Critically, these differences were similar for students and educators. In contrast, the only statement in which beliefs did not differ from attitudes, for either educators or students, was towards the idea that the university's purpose is to make society more productive. In this, both groups indicated that they are indifferent to this purpose, i.e., both of their average means were close to neutral. We acknowledge there are two options for the interpretation of nonsignificance: either participants believe the university's purpose is to make society more productive and that the university is doing that or the university's purpose is not to make society more productive and that the university is not doing that.

If we accept the second interpretation, such finding may be reflected in previous reports of Lekka-Kowalik (2022) who asked the question: "Should we turn universities into capitalist enterprises?" (p. 140), while speaking of 'the Wolf' in HE settings. The Wolf was first presented in "The Academic Manifesto: From an Occupied to a Public University" by Halfman & Radder (2015) who recognize the managerial pattern that surged in universities across the world, although most evidently, in the Netherlands. Hence, the Wolf mainly refers to the pressure of publications for educators to ensure their jobs, it refers to the pressure of knowledge-production-oriented settings that were created somewhere in the past 100 years and which jointly contribute to the deterioration of humanistic values of HE or as shown in Halfman & Radder (2015):

"The scientific publication system is now all but broken: it is caving in under an endless stream of worthless publications, edited papers posing as republications 'for a different audience', strategic citations, and opportunistic or commercial journals: an exponentially growing stream of output, hardly ever read" (p.167).

There is a chance our participants understand the university as needing to contribute to societal development, yet not through means of sustaining the university's global image. University

rankings are connected to publications as the number of publications determines a university's global ranking which creates a highly competitive environment for not only educators but also universities as institutions (Brankovic, et al., 2018; Lekka-Kowalik, 2022). We can substantiate this idea as both educators and students indicated that the university *is* aiming to improve on global rankings more than it *should*.

Similarly, both students and educators think settings of HE should employ more humanistic values such as the development of critical thinking skills or knowledge gain in one's field of choice. However, as indicated by the examination of paired t-tests on attitude and belief statements, students put forward the want to learn how to prepare for their professional careers better, educators believe it is not their responsibility to ensure that. Hence, how can we bridge the wish to have a system that supports humanistic, knowledge-oriented values with the reality of a performance-focused system?

The complexity of this question is shown when the inclusivity standards HE poses on its stakeholders are examined. Concerning these standards, we would like to present some answers to open questions at the end of the study. Several participants' answers focused on financial support and accessibility of university, most arguing that education should be available to people of all socio-economic backgrounds, while some argued university to be insufficiently academically challenging. Additionally, our participants seemed to recognize the dilemma between a productivity-focused university and the aims of a research university, as represented in the following quote:

“The university is in a bit of a bind. Everybody has ideas about what it should be, but these different ideas are not necessarily compatible. For example, we can't be an 'employee factory' AND also offer a deep academic education. Students can't be forced to work day jobs AND also spend the necessary time on their study. We can't be a selective institution of

higher education AND eliminate all cognitive or emotional barriers. Part of our current problem seems to be that we're trying to make everybody happy. That never works.”

It appears just like in Halffman & Radder (2015), some of our participants recognized the duality of the question on the purpose of HE. Such reasoning could also be recognised in the ranking of students' reasons for studying. Their highest ranked values were those of knowledge gain and developing one's interest while the third one was to 'obtain a degree', a reason which is an indication of present credentialism and pragmatism. To explain this finding we can consider what is more measurable. A credential is a written document stating what one achieved whereas humanistic values, such as the development of the self, are difficult to observe. This difference in measurement could partly explain the frustration students and academics experience regarding current academic conditions (Bal et al., 2014). Academia may have begun to prioritise pragmatic and productionist values over humanistic ones which for some can lead to dissatisfaction and a diffused sense of purpose. The main takeaway here is that universities are perceived as both; a place where one can participate in the production of knowledge and an institution that has a relationship to the job market.

### **Limitations**

Firstly, we had no existing research paradigm through which we could classify our findings, therefore they should be understood as preliminary grounds for understanding the purpose of HE. We should note that when we referred to attitudes and beliefs, we could only assume the data interpretation because there are two ways of interpretation as explained earlier. Secondly, our study sample comprised people affiliated with a university who tend to be more critical of societal structures which is an element that could partly explain why there were so many significant differences between beliefs and attitudes (Turk, L., & Adrinek, 2024, 3:28). To address this concern, the numerous significant findings could be due to chance capitalization. However, we have accounted for this possibility by applying Bonferroni corrections.



To repeat, most of our study sample were people came from psychological backgrounds who may readily hold more humanistic values which could explain more highly rated humanistic values, whereas if we were to focus on people with a business background, perhaps, materialistic or credential values would be more appreciated as business context tends to push those values more (Kasser & Ahuvia, 2002). Lastly, perhaps our survey was too nonspecific when we referred to students's roles, educators' roles and the university's roles, creating an us-vs-them effect. Once our participants identified themselves as either students or educators, such an effect could make them more critical of their respective outgroups. For example, if a person identified as a student, she could be readily more critical of educators' roles and the university's roles. On a final note, there is no elaboration on who or what the university is when we asked the participants to evaluate their attitudes and beliefs about the university's roles which could attenuate the us/ them bias as the outgroup (university) was too unspecified, yet easily perceived as not part of the ingroup.

## **Conclusion**

This study's results point to three essential observations. Firstly, views on what is the purpose of higher education differ, yet not significantly when comparing the views of students to educators. Students and educators seem to largely agree in terms of attitudes and beliefs in the context of understanding the purpose of HE. Secondly, there appears to be a gap between beliefs and attitudes regarding the roles of students, educators, and universities. Thirdly, there is no framework available through which these observations could be classified and understood in terms of practical implications.

In other words, based on different reports of various needs and wants e.g. more university accommodation in times of crisis, less pressuring environment for educators as reported by (Bal et al., 2014), as well the previously mentioned gap discovered in our study and creation of PaTHES, students and educators within HE seem to want to understand how they fit in the system of HE and how the very same system fits them. By such understanding and making adaptive changes, the well-being of both educators and students could be improved (Bal et al., 2014). For example, perhaps by

framing the university's purpose, there would be a lesser dilemma with what one can do with their degree. Yet, again, there is no available system through which we could classify such findings.

If we do not wish to partake in so-called productivist universities (Lekka-Kowalik, 2022), Halffman & Radder (2015) drafted ideas of what would create a public university, i.e. university that is free of the wolf. Furthermore, Halffman & Radder (2017) presented seven means through which the wolf could be confronted. Here lies one of the meanings of understanding what we deem as the purpose of a university. By creating a group consensus on future actions and ideals, universities could be adapted to people's wants and needs. Universities could be what we currently understand as what they should be and to make sensible changes, we must first create common grounds on what the purpose of HE is.

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## Appendix

### Survey Instrument

#### Start of Block: Block 1

Q1 Dear participant,

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this survey, which is part of our Bachelor thesis project. Our aim is to understand how students and faculty members of the University perceive the purpose of university education. Our focus is on describing these perceptions among students and faculty members, how they may affect interactions between students and faculty along with how they display engagement with university education on a personal level. We will ask you for statements about different viewpoints regarding university education and its purpose.

All answers will be collected anonymously and will not be traceable to you as an individual. Your responses will only be available to our research team. We do not expect this survey to have any negative impact on you, as all we are asking about will be a description of your thoughts towards education. However, we understand that we are currently all living in straining times and we would like you to be aware that you can quit this survey at any time you feel uncomfortable. This will not have any negative consequences for you.

We strongly recommend the use of a laptop or computer for the most comfortable survey-taking experience.

At the end of this survey, you are asked if you want to participate in the lottery, where we will give away five €30 vouchers. Participation in this lottery is completely voluntary. Your contact information will be saved separately from your responses.

Lastly, if there are any questions about your data, our survey, withdrawing from the study or you have any complaints, you are free to send an email to our thesis supervisor: Dr. A. Sarampalis

([a.sarampalis@rug.nl](mailto:a.sarampalis@rug.nl))

By agreeing below, you agree to having read this consent form and understood the general idea of this research, to the collection and storage of your data, and that you have been informed of your rights.

Thank you for your time and care in completing this brief survey,

Saran Akhbari

Mats Benninghaus

Eva Brank

Daffa Alfikri Alamsyah

Paulien Kiewiet

Max van der Schoor

I consent (1)

I do not consent (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Q1 = I do not consent

**End of Block: Block 1**

**Start of Block: Block 2**

Q2 What is your primary role in university education?

Educator (1)

Student (2)

**End of Block: Block 2**

**Start of Block: Block 3**

Q3 How old are you? (in years)

Q4 What gender do you identify as?

Male (1)

Female (2)

Non-binary (3)

Other (please specify) (4) \_\_\_\_\_

Prefer not to say (5)

Q5 What is your nationality?

Dutch (1)

Other (please specify) (2) \_\_\_\_\_

Display This Question: If Q2 = Student

Q6 Which level of education do you currently follow?

Bachelor (1)

Master (2)

PhD (3)

Already graduated from RUG (4)

Other (please specify) (5) \_\_\_\_\_

Display This Question: If Q2 = Student

Q7 What program do you currently follow?

- Psychology (1)
- Sociology (2)
- Pedagogy and Educational Sciences (3)
- Other (please specify) (4) \_\_\_\_\_

Display This Question: If Q2 = Student

Q8 Which year of your study program are you currently in?

- 1st year (1)
- 2nd year (2)
- 3rd year (3)
- 4th year (4)
- Other (please specify) (5) \_\_\_\_\_

Display This Question: If Q2 = Educator

Q9 What program do you mainly teach in?

- Psychology (1)
- Sociology (2)
- Pedagogy and Educational Sciences (3)
- Other (please specify) (4) \_\_\_\_\_

Display This Question: If Q2 = Educator

Q10 What is your job title at your institution?

- PhD Student (1)
- Lecturer (2)
- Assistant Professor (3)
- Adjunct Professor (5)
- Full Professor (6)
- Other (please specify) (7) \_\_\_\_\_

**End of Block: Block 3**

**Start of Block: Block 4**

Display this Question: If Q2 = Student

Q11 Rate the following values based on your own reasons for studying at university.

I study to...

	Does not describe me (16)	Describes me slightly well (17)	Describes me moderately well (18)	Describes me very well (19)	Describes me extremely well (20)
Obtain a degree (1)					
Gain knowledge in my field of choice (2)					
Meet the expectations of family and friends (3)					
Postpone starting a professional career (4)					
Develop a social network (5)					
Develop a professional network (6)					
Explore my interests (7)					
Develop my potential as a person (8)					
Improve my job opportunities (9)					

**End of Block: Block 4****Start of Block: Block 5**

Q12 Imagine a friend or loved one is at the age when they're considering going to University. Rate the following values based on what you would advise your friend/loved one to study for.

I would advise my friend/loved one to study to...

	Does not describe me (11)	Describes me slightly well (12)	Describes me moderately well (13)	Describes me very well (14)	Describes me extremely well (15)
Obtain a degree (1)					

Gain knowledge  
in ones field of  
choice (2)

Meet the  
expectations of  
family and  
friends (3)

Postpone starting  
a professional  
career (4)

Develop a social  
network (5)

Develop a  
professional  
network (6)

Explore ones  
interests (7)

Develop ones  
potential as a  
person (8)

Improve their job  
opportunities (9)

Q13 For the next few items we will ask you to rate different statements on a 5-point scale. In all cases, (--) indicates completely disagree, while a (++) indicates completely agree. The midpoint ( | ) should be selected when your opinion is neutral or if you do not have an opinion at all.

I understand (1)

Q14 Firstly, we would like to ask three questions on your personal sense of purpose, in general

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
(--)(1)	(-)(2)	( )(3)	(+)(4)	(++)(5)

I have certain life  
goals that compel  
me to keep going  
(1)

I have  
overarching  
goals that guide  
me in my life (2)

I have goals in  
life that are very  
important to me  
(3)

### End of Block: Block 5

### Start of Block: Block 6

Q15 Next, we would like you to state to which degree you disagree or agree with the following statements.

You will see that every statement has two of these 5-point scales to answer: one is to indicate your beliefs on what the purpose of education should be, while the other is to rate how you believe that education currently is.

The following statements ask about the content of university education.

University students **SHOULD** be taught to    University students **ARE** taught to

-- (1)   - (2)   | (3)   + (4)   ++ (5)   -- (1)   - (2)   | (3)   + (4)   ++ (5)

Be more  
adaptive to a  
changing  
environment  
(1)

Discover their  
interests (2)

Develop  
personal skills  
(e.g., self-  
awareness,  
resilience,  
independence)  
(3)

Develop social  
skills (e.g.,  
communication  
, empathy) (4)

Develop  
professional  
skills (e.g.,  
teamwork,  
planning) (5)

Shape their  
identity (6)



Prepare for their career (e.g., make a LinkedIn profile, write professional emails) (7)

Learn critical thinking skills (8)

Expand personal network (9)

Develop personal ethics (10)

Contemplate societal issues (11)

Develop professional ethics (12)

Think creatively (13)

Cultivate a sense of personal responsibility (e.g., be proactive, accountable) (14)

Prioritize education over other interests (15)

Q16 The following statements ask about the **role of educators within the university**.

Rate to which degree you **disagree** or **agree** with these statements.

University educators **SHOULD** aim to

University educators **DO** aim to

-- (1) - (2) | (3) + (4) ++ (5) -- (1) - (2) | (3) + (4) ++ (5)

Create a space where everyone's opinions are heard (1)

Create an interactive classroom environment (2)

Learn from students (3)

Instil factual knowledge and skills onto their students (4)

Instil applicable knowledge and skills onto their students (5)

Teach about societal problems (6)

Foster rapport with fellow university personnel (7)

Foster rapport with students (8)

Prioritize education over other interests (9)

Be an authority figure (10)

Not impose a strong political direction in the classroom (11)

**End of Block: Block 6**

**Start of Block: Block 7**



Develop a culture of lifelong learning (9)

Include practical courses that resemble real life in education programs (10)

Improve its status on global rankings (11)

Offer support to students, staff, etc., in times of crisis (12)

### **End of Block: Block 7**

### **Start of Block: Block 8**

Display This Question: If Q2 = Student

Q18 What do you estimate your Grade Average to be in your current program?

- 6 or lower (1)
- 6-7 (2)
- 7-8 (3)
- 8-9 (4)
- 9 or higher (5)
- Prefer not to say/I don't know (6)

Display This Question: If Q2 = Student

Extremely dissatisfied (1)    Somewhat dissatisfied (2)    Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (3)    Somewhat satisfied (4)    Extremely satisfied (5)

Satisfaction level  
(1)

Q19 Overall, how satisfied are you with your experience as a university student?

**End of Block: Block 8**

**Start of Block: Block 9**

Display This Question: If Q2 = Educator

Extremely dissatisfied (1)    Somewhat dissatisfied (2)    Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (3)    Somewhat satisfied (4)    Extremely satisfied (5)

Satisfaction level  
(1)

Q20 Overall, how satisfied are you with your experience as a university educator?

**End of Block: Block 9**

**Start of Block: Block 10**

**1 Not at all true (1)    2 Hardly true (2)    3 Moderately true (3)    4 Exactly true (4)**

I always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough (1)

If someone opposes me, I can find means and ways to get what I want (2)

It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals (3)

I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events (4)

Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations (5)

I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort (6)

I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities (8)

When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions (9)

If I am in a bind, I can usually think of something to do (10)

No matter what comes my way, I'm usually able to handle it (11)

Q21 Rate each statement on how well it reflects how you feel about yourself.

**End of Block: Block 10**

**Start of Block: Block 11**

Q22 Having answered all of these questions, do you have something to add that pertains to the purpose of university education (what it should or should not be, what is currently is or is not)?

**End of Block: Block 11**

**Start of Block: Block 12**

Q23 Thank you for your participation in our survey.

Please leave your email address here if you want to enter to win a €30 voucher. Participation is completely voluntary; your email address will not be connected to the rest of your responses.

- No, I would not like to participate (1)
- Yes, I would like to participate (fill in your email address below) (2)

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**End of Block: Block 12**